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Trying to counter Castro

Working the Cuban Beat

[redacted]

The few of us who were present at the birth of the Castro regime and who worked against it sporadically for three decades are still around as observers in its declining years. I have been particularly lucky in this regard. By far the most interesting and productive period of this era was at the Havana station from the last year of the Batista regime in 1958 to our break in relations with Castro in January 1961.

[redacted]

After the break, I was assigned to Miami for most of the 1960s and the early 1970s.

[redacted]

I returned to Miami to handle Radio Americas, CIA's propaganda operation against Cuba. [redacted] I returned to Miami as case officer-director of a Cuban intelligence service in exile known as the AMOTS. I retired in 1972, but I was recalled to service as an independent contractor to screen and interview arrivals during the Mariel boat lift. I continued to interview Cuban arrivals until 1991.

[redacted]

When I arrived in Havana in 1958, my main assignment [redacted]

[redacted] There were walk-ins in fairly large numbers. But almost all these people were revolutionary advocates running a propaganda campaign against the US Embassy in general, and CIA in particular. Thus, Castro was painted as a democratic reformer. Batista's "atrocities" were exaggerated and those of the 26th of July and the DR dismissed as acts of overzealous underlings. Batista's fall was touted as inevitable, and the number of guerrillas fighting the regime inflated exponentially. As of January 1959, our efforts had failed.

Castro was an attractive and popular figure, and the United States had no real alternative but to support him initially when he came to power. The CIA station officers, many of whose casual contacts saw through the Castro democratic facade, were virtually unanimous in their opposition to Castro from the day he took power. The facade was convincing to many, however, because the first revolutionary government was made up of some people with ostensibly impeccable liberal credentials.

Castro did not take long before showing his true colors by reversing court decisions, ridding himself of his democratic prime minister and most of his democratically oriented entourage, and by placing "Che" Guevara, an Argentine physician and a Marxist, in charge of the

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economy, as well as his brother, Raul, in charge of the Defense Ministry, and himself in dictatorial control of the nation. In the light of these developments, the intelligence business picked up. Walk-ins, defectors (15 members of the Supreme Court seeking visas one Saturday morning), and counterrevolutionary groups began to multiply, and the intelligence drought became a deluge. The problem was handling the mass of the discontented during late 1959 and in 1960. It was difficult to evaluate the potential of a variety of counterrevolutionary groups and their usually extravagant claims. Some of the more promising counterrevolutionaries became known [redacted]

Exporting the Revolution

From the beginning, one principal aim of Castro and Guevara was to export the revolution. Caribbean revolutionaries of varied political stripes swarmed to Havana looking for help as soon as Castro took over. [redacted]

[redacted] Castro, in most cases, decided to use his own people for the many "invasions" that he launched during my stay in Havana against Mexico, Haiti, Honduras, and several other countries. Castro did not fail completely in his attempts to export his doctrine. He helped the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and numerous other rebel groups throughout the Western Hemisphere and elsewhere, including those in Colombia, El Salvador, Peru, Uruguay, and the Dominican Republic. As of 1993, some Castro-inspired destabilization remained in some Latin American countries. This messianic facet of the Cuban Revolution may have been one of its most destructive aspects. It was costly to several Latin American countries and to the United States, which tried to contain it.

For a time things went smoothly, but the agent had three female neighbors who were apartment "mates." He had affairs with all three, and this created a real ruckus. I had to find him another rent-free safehouse. I found one, and once again banked on government inefficiency in administering the urban reform law. We broke relations with Cuba a few months later, and my problem of keeping him in a new safehouse disappeared when he departed.

Staybehind Program

The station received no guidance from Headquarters on establishing a staybehind operation, and we did not have much time to create a mechanism. There were many distractions, and there were no replacements for departing officers. TDYers were often more of a hindrance than a help. We would have to reach some compromise between a local chain of command and independent

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operations. Funding would be a problem both for the independents and for any net established. At this time, I have scant recollection of which agent was which. While we were planning, each agent was handled by the case officer who had either recruited him or to whom he had been assigned. As planning progressed, the operation's organization, if such it could be termed, took a shape of sorts.

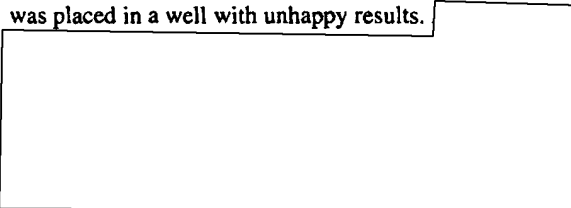


Agents abounded because opposition to the regime had become substantial, and some who would have been unwilling to cooperate a year earlier now began to come around.



Headquarters sent [redacted] agent radios to Havana for caching or stashing around the island. By modern standards, these were dinosaurs. They came packed in a large waterproof "coffin" which would have permitted caching in a lake or stream, as well as in the ground. All station officers were expected to help in placing the cumbersome radios. A ground cache was, in effect, a real burial, and precise details on the location were

required for ultimate recovery and use. Case officers transported the radios to different parts of the island; some were buried, some were stashed, and at least one was placed in a well with unhappy results.



Another radio-stashing operation also returned to haunt me. One afternoon a colleague told me that he could stash two radios with contacts in Cienfuegos in south-central Cuba, and he suggested that I accompany him. We were stopped en route by the Cuban police, who ignored our claim of diplomatic immunity and opened our car's trunk. Fortunately, the radios were in cardboard boxes which the police did not bother to open. In Cienfuegos my colleague and I went to his contact's house, and my friend took him aside while I chatted with his son. Years later, when I was at Miami International Airport on my way to a TDY, the airline agent cursed me when I gave him my ticket. The ticket agent was the son with whom I had talked in Cienfuegos. My associate had failed to tell his father what was being stashed, and the father and son got rid of the radios when they discovered what they were.



While a good deal of work had been done in developing our staybehind mechanism, much more was still needed when relations were broken. After the announcement was made, I gave my servant some money, packed my scant belongings, drew a substantial amount of money from the station, phoned all principal agents and the chief radio operator, and met them all in my official vehicle on a boulevard a few blocks from the Embassy. I turned over the funds to the agent I considered the most astute, [redacted] gave them

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all last-minute instructions and returned to the Embassy to await transport to the ship that would take us from Havana to West Palm Beach.

I realize that I violated several security practices at the last meeting. Given the time available, however, I decided to take the risk. The net survived for some time, and to my knowledge no one was arrested as a result of the emergency meeting. The principal agent with whom I left the funds survived, but he ultimately had to brave the Florida Straits on a raft.

The departure from the Embassy was an emotional experience, both for the Cubans and for US personnel. There were Cubans, still unwilling to believe that there would be no more visas, seeking our last-minute help in vain. Cuba had been an interesting experience for most of us, and many could not help recalling the contagious gaiety we had found upon our arrival and before Castro took over. That was gone now. In addition to the visa seekers, the Embassy parking lot was filled with angry Cubans, civilian and militia, who jeered at the "Yankee imperialists."

A Denied Operations Area

[Redacted]

There also was the burgeoning intelligence service in exile that we were developing and which, at first, I considered an administrative nuisance, in part because there were so many other fish to fry. I was wrong, and little did I suspect at the time that one day I would be case officer-director of this group. Ultimately, it

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

The pursuit of operational leads is a tiring and generally unrewarding job because dry holes are the norm. Sometimes even what at first appears to be a home run turns out to be a waste of time and money. One particular case sticks in my mind.

[Redacted]

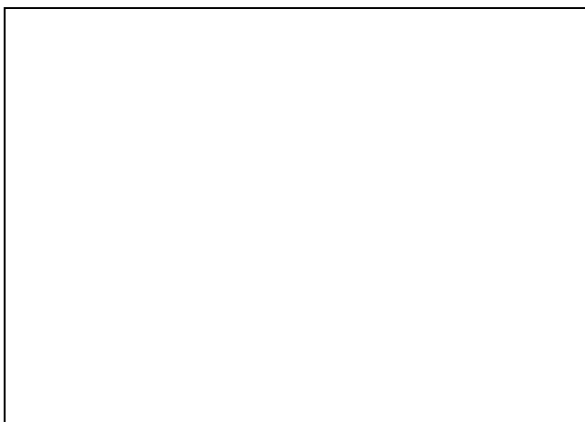
The operation worked for a short time, and I was transferred elsewhere. When I returned to Miami for another tour a few years later and inquired about the operation, I learned that the agent had been jailed for embezzlement, that he had produced precious little before his arrest,

[Redacted]

During the Bay of Pigs invasion, Miami station was largely a support mechanism for an operation run out of Washington. The Cuban shadow government in exile was in the area, but the officer dealing with that group was not an officer permanently assigned to the station. *Brigadistas* who participated in the invasion were picked up in Miami.

[Redacted]

If the option of a military invasion had been selected during the missile crisis in 1962, I was one of five officers who would have been sent to the island to establish a new station. All of us were military reserve officers.



case officer, my visits to the island were not frequent, but those of the station manager were, and he usually had to resolve personnel conflicts, [redacted] and logistic flaps.

A new chief of station, [redacted] was not entirely satisfied with Radio Americas, even though the letter response from both Cuba and Latin America was outstanding. He felt that some of the programs were too propagandistic and hard hitting. My efforts to tone down the programs to the point of little more than straight news and music never quite satisfied him, and perhaps it was fortunate for me that the operation was canceled as my tour was about to end. The reasons for the cancellation are especially nebulous, considering that a few months before termination we had been instructed to lease new quarters and buy the equipment to produce our own programs in our own studio instead of farming them out.

Radio Americas

[redacted] I returned to Miami and again became a covert action officer. My principal case was our major radio operation targeted at Cuba, at that time called Radio Americas, but originally known as Radio Swan, because the transmitter was located on Great Swan Island off the Honduran coast.

This operation, which had been in being from the early days of the Castro regime, was probably as effective as such an operation can be, especially considering the limited funding it received. Although it was supposed to be a clandestine operation, that is, privately sponsored, from the outset Castro was complaining about "a steamship company without ships" named the Gilbarlter Steamship Company, the original notional company that was supposed to own the station. Along with the transmitter, technicians and news readers were stationed on Swan Island, which was about a mile or so long. With Little Swan it was the subject of a low-key territorial dispute between the United States and Honduras. (In recent years the United States has given up its claim to the islands.)

Along with Radio Americas, the United States had a weather and FAA facility on Great Swan. The other occupants of the island were Caymanese who would come and go. Regular R and R was necessary for Radio Americas personnel who received logistic support and program tapes from south Florida by occasional DC-3 flights and regular weekly flights by smaller aircraft. As

While RFE and Radio Liberty may have been very marginally helpful in hastening the crumbling of the Soviet Bloc, Radio Americas may have had a deleterious effect, though one consonant with US policy. It may have slightly aggravated discontent on the island and thus contributed to the exodus of some of the very people who might have helped to overthrow Castro. If such is the case, it also contributed to the costly immigration problems which have plagued Miami and other cities.

Cuban Intelligence Service in Exile

[redacted] the nucleus of an exile intelligence group began to take

shape. [redacted]

[redacted] both the station and the Cuban intelligence group, by now known as the AMOTS, had begun to grow. I turned over the operation to a contract employee whom I had handled in Havana, and he ran it for several years. This was the same man that I had left in Havana as chief of the staybehind mechanism. He did a commendable job during his long tenure, and he was well rewarded by the Agency.

I became responsible for the operation in 1970, [redacted]

[redacted] During this time, the operation's boats were being phased out because AMOTS-sponsored infiltration missions had ceased and personnel had been cut. [redacted] had the task of cutting this number in half immediately before I retired. During most of my tenure, however, the operation was a principal source of intelligence for the Miami station and had assumed many of the Cuban exile interviewing functions of CIA's overt office in Miami.

The principal sources of information derived from interviews of new arrivals from Cuba and the impressive files that the organization had developed. We had two screeners at the airport who talked to adult arrivals to see if they might have information to service our requirements. Basic personal data, including Miami addresses and telephone numbers, were taken down and the person was told that he or she would be contacted for questioning in depth. Because the screening was done under what appeared to be official auspices, protests were few, and the "go to hell" attitude assumed by some Cubans in later years were rare. [redacted]

[redacted] The Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966 was passed, and any Cuban who could make it to the United States legally could claim permanent residence after a year and a day. The Cubans could come with an immigrant's visa, or, as was to happen so often later, on rafts and inner tubes.

The screening results were passed to the Chief of the interviews section in a large safehouse near the AMOTS headquarters. There were about a dozen interviewers assigned to that unit; they specialized to some

extent on various subjects so that a particular interviewer would have at least some basic knowledge of the field on which the source had information.

The raw interview results were delivered to AMOTS headquarters by courier from the safehouse, where most of the in-depth interviews were conducted. These were then scanned and sent to one of the sections, usually positive intelligence, to be put into report format. Sometimes collateral information was added from file research or from the knowledgeability of the person preparing the report. Copies would be sent to the files and to the studies section, which from time to time was requested to prepare biographical, political, and economic studies.

All raw reports were written in Spanish, and those forwarded to the station as disseminable positive intelligence or counterintelligence reports were translated by one expert translator and by another who required a good bit of supervision. I edited all the reports and checked them for correct translation, when necessary.

In the AMOTS headquarters, [redacted] there was a small stable of employees available for immediate travel to interview Cubans. [redacted] their reports were then processed through AMOTS headquarters. Each day I would meet with a station courier to pass on all of our processed materials and to receive any station requirements. Telephone contact with the station was frequent, but my visits to the station were rare.

I believe that this operation was the principal source of station intelligence during the operation of [redacted]

[redacted] there was no longer a need for such an operation. It became my last and unpleasant task to reduce the operation by 50 percent. Mass terminations are not easy, and no training course could satisfactorily address the problem. Common sense and a touch of empathy, feigned or real, helps. [redacted]

[redacted] who told me that he also had termination problems. AMOTS personnel who had served loyally for over a decade were offered a financial separation package.

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Maríel Boat Lift

In 1980, triggered by a mass invasion of the Peruvian Embassy in Havana by Cuban freedom seekers, Castro again resorted to the escape valve to rid himself of the discontented by facilitating mass flight to the United States. He invited Cubans already in the United States to come to the port of Maríel several miles to the west of Havana by boat and pick up loved ones. Castro decided who would leave. He termed them all *gusanos* (worms), and, though most wanted to leave to join relatives in the United States and live better, Castro managed to send us a good measure of antisocial types, including seasoned criminals as well as residents of the Havana Mental Hospital.

Although I had been offered a contract with the Agency when I retired, I refused because I wanted to teach, travel, and write. By 1980, I had taught for eight years and had done a good deal of traveling. The urge to write, at that time, was unfulfilled. I had turned down other Agency work offers.



The flow continued by boat, by raft, through the Mexican border, and by sponsorship of Cuban exiles in other countries by the Cuban-American National Foundation. Panama, where Cubans obtained entry visas, was used by hundreds as the departure point for the trek to the Mexican border. This "underground railroad" had a big disadvantage. Such arrivals were deemed illegal, so they could not avail themselves of the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966 which permits any Cuban arriving legally to legal residence after one year in the United States.

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Cuban Beat

An Assessment

This story of my experiences is merely a suggestion of CIA's extensive operational activity against the Cuban target. The effort has had its successes and its failures, including the Bay of Pigs and the revelation by a defector in the late 1980s that most Cuban agents "recruited" in the previous decade or so were "dangles" who remained loyal to Castro.

persistent efforts to export his revolution militarily and by subversion. The price has been phenomenal, and we may have prolonged his existence by encouraging and facilitating the mass exodus of those who might have developed a viable resistance movement. This, of course, was a policy decision.

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Nonetheless, policymakers have been kept informed of internal Cuban developments, and the Agency has kept Castro off balance by reporting on and frustrating his

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